



PROFILES IN soil health

Ruth Rabinowitz
Six Iowa Counties
Corn and Soybeans/CRP
Planting: Oats, Rape Seed & Hairy Vetch



No One Will Care for the Land Like You Do.

Nearly 2,000 miles separates Ruth Rabinowitz from her family's Iowa farmland. Without the advantage of growing up on a farm, the new partner in Rabinowitz Family Farms now finds herself serving as the family's point person for managing 10 farms in six Iowa counties as well as one farm in South Dakota.

There's a steep learning curve for such an undertaking, but it's one Ruth is facing head-on. "Dad grew up poor in New Jersey," Ruth explains. "He put himself through medical school and became a doctor, but he always dreamed about farming. He began buying farmland in Iowa in 1978 and would come to the Iowa State Fair every year from our home in the Phoenix area of Arizona to check on his farms."



A cover crop of oats, rape seed and hairy vetch was flown onto 61 acres this past fall in three fields in Clarke County. Ruth wants to expand use of cover crops for better soil health on the family farms.

Sometimes, Ruth says, she and her sister would come along. “I was ten years old when he bought the first farm. I remember how excited Dad was, and how absolutely euphoric he would become when it came time to visit,” Ruth says. “Though he still loves these Iowa farms, it’s become more difficult and tiring now for him to visit. So two years ago, Shauna and I offered to do that for him. We promised to take lots of pictures and call him regularly during our visits to update him.”

The two women and their father David have formed a family limited partnership, and Ruth—who lives in the Monterey Bay area of California—stepped in for her dad, determined to learn as much as she could about farming and taking care of the farms he loves so much.

Called conservationists to a meeting

To begin her education in farm management, Ruth attended an Eco-Farm conference in California, where she talked with conservationists from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). “They told me the NRCS could help me here in Iowa,” Ruth says. “So I read everything I could on the Internet, wrote down a lot of questions, and prepared to meet with them.”

In April of 2014, Ruth called a meeting of several NRCS district conservationists in south central Iowa, as well as the forester and wildlife biologist of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources that serve the counties involved. Because of the family interest in wildlife, Ruth also invited a representative from Pheasants Forever.

“I sent my questions to these conservation experts ahead of time, and then Shauna and I spent nearly two hours at the meeting with them. They had answers to all our questions and were eager to meet us again on the land,” Ruth says. “Subsequently, I did meet with many of them at the individual farms in their respective counties. Their help in determining



Ruth Rabinowitz of Santa Cruz, California goes over details of the conservation plan on one of the family farms with conservationist Dennis Schrodtt. The Clarke County farm, with corn, soybeans, CRP, and forestland, was once owned by former Iowa governor William Beardsley and is a family favorite.

what we could do to preserve and enhance our farms has been invaluable.”

From April of 2014 to November 2014, Ruth spent a total of about four months in the state exploring each of the family farms and overseeing improvements to several of them.

Building relationships with tenants

“I took horticulture and environmental studies in college, taught environmental education to young children, and watched things grow in my own backyard garden, but that didn’t prepare me for managing this quantity of farmland. I just had to step up to the plate and do it,” Ruth says. “I’ve discovered it takes a variety of skills to manage farms and practice land stewardship.”

While the job of farm management could be overwhelming, Ruth has made it manageable by breaking it down into bite size pieces. She’s made simple goals. “One is to build relationships with tenants,” she says. “I hadn’t talked with most of them; didn’t even have their phone numbers. That ‘one-on-one’ communication was missing, so I’m changing that. I want our tenants to understand our goals for the land so we can work as a team to care for it.”

"They have to know we care," Ruth says. "After I explained that to one of our tenants, he said he was so glad to work with us, because he shared the same goal of land stewardship."

Another goal was to stem gully erosion by installing more grassed waterways. Ruth has done that on five farms. She also has plans to enter more steeply sloping, highly erodible land in one county into the Conservation Reserve Program. The CRP efforts will include restoring habitat for pheasant recovery.

"We still employ a couple of farm managers, but I'm going to manage all the CRP land and I'm working towards managing all the land myself," Ruth says. She would like to see all the cropland farmed with no-till methods, and is working toward that by writing leases with tenants that don't allow fall tillage.

What we own is topsoil

Another of Ruth's simple goals is to work towards having all corn and soybean land farmed with no-till and cover crops. "That would be a great requirement in our leases at some point," she says. "We'd like our land to be all no-till and cover crops. In fact, we'll step up to the plate as landowners and contribute to the cost when we find cover crops required on any of our farms."

"To date, I've watched probably 50 videos on the benefits of cover crops, seeing the earthworms and the stability the plants bring to the soil. Cover crops allow more air into the soil, and will give a yield bump after using them for a few years. Cover crops help give the soil its life and they go hand in hand with the no-till concept of 'the less you work the soil the better.'"

Ruth has seen first-hand the transformation in her CRP lands. "I see worms in that soil, and the airy, cake-like appearance of the topsoil," she says. She's also watching with great interest how a cover crop mixture of oats, rapeseed and hairy vetch performs on 61 acres of cropland on one of their farms.



The Rabinowitz family farms include forestlands as well as cropland.

"What we own on these farms is the topsoil. I say we own it, but what I realized is that we really are just directing its care. We are actually being shepherds of the land," she says.

No one will care for the land like you do

As Ruth has grown into her role as a land owner and manager, she's also become more convinced absentee landowners can make a difference in land care. "I would say to other women landowners that they have a responsibility to set the tone for care of the land," Ruth says. "You don't have to be a scientist," she adds. "If you have a passion, you can learn about farming. You just need to ask questions, get involved, and follow your heart. No one will care for the land like you do."

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